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THE PHENOMENON OF "JAPAN BASHING" IN US-JAPANESE RELATIONS

The paper presents different perspectives of explaining the phenomenon of "Japan bashing" in the United States starting in mid 1980s and ending in mid 1990s. "Japan bashing" can be defined as a harsh criticism, widely voiced, of Japan and its economic policy, which was perceived as a reason for different American problems and a growing threat to the country's global standing. First, the historical circumstances in US-Japanese relations are explained and the phenomenon itself described. Different originators of this kind of discourse are named, including journalists, politicians and the realm of popular culture. Some attention is given to the analysis provided by the so called "Revisionists": a group of economists and journalists trying to show the Japanese economic model as a new paradigm that should inspire the US and contesting being called "the bashers." Then the explanations provided by the various social sciences are summarized, including the substitution of Soviet Union by Japan as a main competitor, different global economic environment and finally the threat of strong Japan to American identity as well as to the the narrative of asymmetrical US--Japanese relations after the WWII, in which the US played the role of a patron. Concluding remarks place this period of mutual relations in a broader historical context of stereotypical perceiving Japan as a threat but also point out the ambiguities of the discourse of "Japan bashing."

Between mid 1980s and mid 1990s visible tension arose between two close allies: the US and Japan. Economic relations were at the core of contention. In the US, Japanese economic policy started to be perceived as aggressive, unfair and threatening to undermine the global standing of the United States. In Japan, those accusations were seen as yet another example of Western bullying of emerging but benign Asian power.

What remained in popular memory of those events is not the actual political process of trade negotiations and frictions, but rather a pervasive climate of discourse. "Japan bashing" was the term widely used to describe harsh criticism of Japan in America, criticism which seeped from governmental and business circles to broader audiences through media and popular culture. The term is used to signify the kind of criticism that was unjustified, or at least in some way inappropriate. Precise definition of it is far from unambiguous, however, as many of those charged with using this kind of rhetoric denied any ill intent, asserting their objectivity. This essay will attempt to present different perspectives in explaining this period in US-Japanese relations, concerning the origins of tensions and the character of critical arguments used. Dramatic rhetoric was, fortunately, rarely matched by dramatic events, and so this will rather be an analysis of public discourse of given period instead of one clearly defined time point. I will start by outlining the state of mutual relations between the US and Japan in late '80s and then move to presenting different perspectives of looking at the

conflict, starting from American politicians, media and mass culture, then the group of economists called "revisionists" and, finally, the social scientists' arguments. I will conclude with some of my observations.

The post-war relations between the US and Japan can described as an asymmetrical partnership (Wilkinson 1990: 3–16). Japan became a democratic and uniquely pacifist country, relying on the U.S. for its security, in exchange becoming a staunch political and strategic ally in the American anticommunist policy in the region. Japan's economic recovery was nothing short of a miracle and by 1980s it had become the world's second largest economy. In that time the economic standing of the US was also evolving, albeit in somewhat opposite direction. US economy emerged from the troubles of the past decade with much uncertainty. In globalizing economy it lost its position as the world's biggest creditor; the title now belonged to Japan, while the US developed a chronic foreign trade deficit. Export from Japan was winning the U.S. markets, and the capital gained was being reinvested in the U.S. Japan became a serious competitor in such traditionally American industries as cars and electronics (Wilkinson 1990: 6). Much public attention was devoted to a number of Japanese investments seen as symbolic "trophy purchases," such as Columbia Studios or Rockefeller Center. At the same time U.S. exports and investments in Japan lagged behind and failed to secure considerable shares of Japanese markets. Trade deficit grew from $1.7 billion in 1974 to $50 billion in 1985 (Morris 2006: 64). At the end of the decade, imbalance in trade with Japan stood for 2/3 of total US trade deficit (Wilkinson 1990: 190–199). Series of economic talks and negotiations dragged, with mixed results, into the '90s, in which Washington tried to made Japan to guarantee a given market share for American products, threatening with economic retaliation.

What were, then, the typical themes evoked in criticism of Japan of that time, especially in "Japan bashing"? To present a brief summary of those will also be a presentation of the first perspective on the tensions, coming from the vocal perpetrators of criticism. For them, the economic woes of United States were in large part a fault of Japan. It cunningly took advantage of US military protection and low barriers to US markets to dominate its former protector economically. It kept its own markets closed to US-manufactured goods, made empty promises during trade talks and employed complex state planning and incentives to assure unfairly low prices for its flooding exports, thereby contributing to negative trade balance and the demise of American manufacturing. Its aggressive investments would cause more and more US assets to fall under total Japanese control. In all that, Japan was no longer a "normal" successful competitor, it was once again a threat to America. Global leadership of the US was under attack from "predatory" (Armacost 1996: 24) Japanese economic policies. Consequently, the rhetoric of conflict and war became notorious. The US politicians described the current situation as an "economic Pearl Harbour" (Morris 2006: 19 and Meller 1996: 36) that would enable Japan to finally build the East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere (Morris 2006: 69). An US official proclaimed, during one of the negotiations controversies: "The next time we send a *trade negotiator* to *Tokyo*, he may be *sitting* in the *nose* of a *B-52!*" (quoted in Meller 1996: 36). The economic assault from impenetrable and sneaky enemy became a theme of many popular books, with titles such as "Selling Out: How We Are Letting Japan Buy Our Land, Our Industries, Our Financial Institutions, and Our Future," "Japan's Secret War," "Agents of Influence: How Japan Manipulates America's Political and Economic System," "Japan's Secret Weapon: The

Kata Factor. The Cultural Programming That Made the Japanese the Superior People." In the realm of popular culture, Michael Crichton corporate thriller "The Rising Sun" became proverbial when speaking of "Japan bashing," for its portrayal of Japanese businessman as new breed of "economic samurai" (Morris 2006: 75) warriors, poised to infiltrate the US.

It is worth noting that political rhetoric of "Japan bashing" was used instrumentally by the US administration, which positioned the Congress as the "bad cop," always on the verge of passing protectionist legislation, while the government negotiators played the role of reasonable ones (Dahl 1999: 4). Congressmen seemed perfect for the part, with their explicit sound bites and public demonstrations, the most famous being the smashing of Toshiba electronic equipment on the steps of the Capitol (Meller 1996: 37).

There was a group of publicists and economists, including, among others Clyde Presowitz and James Fallows, who viewed the conflict with much more sophistication. They got to be known as the "Revisionists." For them, the conflict was signifying the emergence of a new model of Japanese capitalism, which bared the shortcomings and anachronisms of American paradigms. Drawing on anthropological theories on Japanese society, they described this new model as culturally unique, with its strict work ethic, state-led long term planning, "patient" capital supplied by corporate owned banks and closed markets. In effect, the "Japanese wealth machine" was unstoppable, bound to overcome American domination, unless, of course, America will take the time to learn from its enemies (Lindsay and Lucas). They would scoff at the accusations of "Japan bashing," they were merely pointing out objective differences of Japan culture and offering suggestions for wise American policy ("Beyond...").

During the tensions and after, social scientists of different fields observing the US--Japanese relations offered their own analysis. Concerned with the level of negative emotions that had arose in the popular discourse, they sought to analyze the images evoked and their origins. The sociological and anthropological perspectives on Japan themselves were not much earlier undergoing similar scrutiny, with scholars questioning their own assumptions and preconceptions skewing the academic understanding of this country. Asserted exceptionalism and totality of Japanese culture was the main one. Distinctiveness and uniqueness of Japanese culture, with its sets of traits such as group orientation and deference to authority, served to neglect dynamic changes of the Japanese society and ignore the agency of Japanese people as individuals. Now it became a part of popular discourse on Japan and various attempts to explain the sources of its success, based on the assumption of Japan's exoticism and impenetrability of its culture. This trait can have a positive connotation of exploration and exchange, but in times of tensions it inevitably brings about notions of danger and suspicion. This applies to both "bashers" as well as more serious commentators – no matter if James Fallow's 1986 article in "The Atlantic" was well researched and balanced, the title "The Japanese Are Different Than You and Me" could not evoke positive feelings among the scholars (Mouler). When positioned as "Ultimate Other" (Rosen), it was easy for Japan once again be presented as an enemy. The realm of trade disputes started to merge with notions of past war and rivalry. Comparisons of Japanese work ethic and corporate strategies to samurai codes and militarism were abound. Asserted "otherness" of Japan made possible to easily draw those analogies, while similar treatment

never occurred in economic relations with Western countries, such as Great Britain, whose investments remained much larger than those of Japan (Wilkinson).

Number of perspectives on the origins of these attitudes were formed. Some sought the reasons for the focus on the Japanese threat in changing global circumstances. New globalised economy forced many to reevaluate long held notions about the capital and ownership. With jobs being outsourced abroad, the U.S. was gradually losing its status of a manufacturing powerhouse. Corporate ownership became supranational, and capital and investments moved freely around the world. Among blue collar workers especially, positioning Japan as the actor responsible for their vulnerable standing, was a way to anthropomorphize foreign capital and transnational corporations, to simply ascribe the responsibility to something tangible and so make venting of frustration and resentment much easier (Neuman 2001: 337). Now a Japanese car could be publicly smashed by disgruntled auto-workers, for it symbolized the evil force behind their woes[1] (Morris 2006: 52).

Another external factor behind "Japan bashing," closely connected with the economic position of the US, was the collapse of Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. It was an obvious historical triumph, and United States' worldwide prestige as a champion of democratic values soared, at least for awhile. At the same time, however, Americans became confused about their global role and position – what was the foundation of global political and military domination when the Soviet archenemy laid defeated and the US was losing the technological and economical race with the rest of the world? Japan could, in a way, fill that "vacuum" on the global stage, become a new global competitor and thus a rationale for continuing American engagement in world affairs (Neuman 2001: 336). It has been pointed out that some qualities ascribed to the Japanese were similar to those of the Soviets – mainly ones of mindless collectivism and robotical obedience. Revisionists' descriptions of Japanese development, to considerable extent, coordinated or even planned by the bureaucrats and politicians bear an uncanny resemblance to the centrally-planned economies of the Soviet Block (Ben-Ami 1997: 6). Public opinion polls conducted in 1990 found that 60% considers Japan to be a bigger threat than Soviet Union (Neuman 2001: 337 and Meller 1996: 37).

Another element of the broader historical context which served to strengthen the notion of Japanese economy being a threat in more than purely business sense was the technological revolution taking place at the time. The potential of digital technologies became obvious to broader audiences not only because computers became "personal." Gulf War made clear what the Revolution in Military Affairs meant. Security and military capability was now dependent not on the number of tanks or planes, but on microchips, satellite uplinks and the like. And it was the electronic industry in which Japan was perceived as a global leader.[2] Infamous smashing of Toshiba's boom

[1] Popular resentment did not spread to any greater extent on Asian-Americans themselves, although at the time fears of that were prominent, see, for example: Masako. One important exception was the brutal murder of Vincent Chen, who was beaten to death by two drunken Detroit car factory workers, even though he was a US-born citizen, of Vietnamese, not Japanese descent. Public outrage was caused by a lenient sentence the perpetrators received, the case dragged for number of years.

[2] It was a notion embraced also by many Japanese politicians and commentators. Assumptions of Japanese power stemming from technological leadership was articulated, for example, in Shintaro Ashihara's widely read "Japan That Can Say No." Former mayor of Tokyo and popular conservative, Ishihara's work, promptly translated into English, called for an increased

boxes on the steps of Congress resulted from the outraged caused by the concern after it sold the Soviets a license for an electronic part which could be used in advanced submarines (Morris 2006: 146).

Other explanations were exploring the power relations between the partners at the time, which were perceived as reversing. In post-war alliance, victorious U.S. assumed the role of the mentor, who was to protect Japan, rebuilt it economically and "sponsor" its reconciliation with and reinstatement into international community. Rapid growth of Japanese economy and its expansion in US and world markets threatened to undermine every aspect of this "foundational narrative" of mutual relations. Former protégé was now becoming a rival, and the historical analogies to Japan's emergence before World War II were readily available. In times of uncertainty, Japan could serve as an "other," onto which the fears could be projected, "other" which once was a deadly threat and could become one once more. This conforms with the relative dissatisfaction theory of conflict in social psychology – the basis of contention don't have to be real, what is needed is sometimes only a perception of harm, in this case the betrayal of American patronage, which could explain various problems of the US outlined above (Luther 2001: 23–34).

In a broader sense, this significance of US-Japan common history can be viewed as an application of general themes and phenomena present in the relations between the West and the East. For the West has always, and on many levels, assumed its natural superiority over the "exotic" and "inscrutable" East. This recent wave of the American fear of Japan to some extent plays into the old "yellow scare" theme, the idea of dangerous "others" overrunning the West (Owens 30–35). This time it was occurring within the economic realm, especially that Japan was the first non-Western culture which autonomously achieved modern, capitalistic economy (and in the past military), powerful enough to challenge America and Europe. While Edward Said's theory dealt mostly with European literary discourse about Middle East, he did claim that it was the Americans who turned the Orientalism into an "applied social science" (quoted in Robertson 1990: 186) after World War II. Distinctions between "rational," "individualistic" and "independent" Americans as opposed to "collectivist" and "hierarchical" Japanese were underlying economical analysis of the revisionists, making some scholars calling them "Academic Orientalists" (Rosen).

In my opinion last two explanations are the most valid ones. They share the basic assumption that, in times of conflict or tensions whether real or imagined, images of "the Other" employed often tell us more about the side which employs them. Being equally distant to virtually all cultural traditions that comprise U.S. multiethnic society, Japan has a unique potential to become America's "Other." Japanese "uniqueness" was paradoxically used to strengthen American identity, with its historic "exceptionalism" (Robertson 1990: 185). As to the specific rhetoric used, here to the historical context of mutual relations explains the most. Without those historical and cultural circumstances, perhaps the tensions would not have spread so noticeably into popular discourse and pop-culture. The concern for the US losing its global status would be of course very much present, but without some of the accompanying accusations of Japan as playing "against the rules," having a hidden agenda or exploiting the benefits of American protection and support.

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assertiveness of Japan on global stage, mirroring many observations made by the revisionists in the US.

Lessons that can be drawn from the different perspectives of looking at the tensions are initially not very optimistic – the ease with which the long dormant stereotypes can be come about in public discourse and influence even well informed commentators and policymakers on both side is startling.

What is also worth noting is the complete disparity between expectation built upon stereotypes evoked and the actual unfolding of historical events. Not that employing stereotypes in making predictions and assessments generally leads to good results, but in case of history of US-Japanese relations this is especially visible. Before the outbreak of the WWII, Japanese were perceived as weak, pathetic imitators; that changed radically after it turned out that imperial Japan was able to conquer half of East Asia in less than a year. Accordingly, Japan was now a warring state of superhuman, vicious and fanatical soldiers, incapable of giving up (Dower 1986: 94–118). But the complicity of the Japanese during the occupation and lack of visible resentment again came unexpected. Parallel can be drawn between these discrepancies and what happen in economic sphere of mutual relations 40 years later. Emergence of Japan as an economic superpower came as a surprise to most and the same can be said about its economic stagnation. Failure of predictions can be pointed out to all groups concerned: politicians of both countries, business analysts, press commentators and various other public opinion leaders, those "bashing" and those offering more informed points of view.

On the other hand, however, it is very important to stress that discourse of "Japan bashing" was never a dominating one. The press seemed to equally often employ negative stereotypes as to condemn the hysterical tone of Japan bashing (Meller 1996: 36 and Morris 2006: 118).The first widely noted use of "Japan bashing" rhetoric in 1985 edition of "New York Times Magazine" was immediately rebuffed in "Newsweek" soon after (Morris 2006: 113). Scholars criticizing skewed perceptions of Japan were also pointing out the exaggerations with throwing accusation of "Japan-bashing." In words of Miyoshi Miyako: "A basher can be informed or uninformed, analytic or irrational, honest or deceptive; in short, anyone who is less than encouraging, enthusiastic, or euphoric about Japan seems to qualify as one" (63). Revisionists, with their "academic orientalism," were at the same time advising U.S. policy makers to learn and emulate Japan, and explained the conduct of Japan's government not always as a product of culture but as a rational decision making (Ben-Ami 1997: 15). Public opinion polls, while demonstrating the widespread notion of Japan emerging as a main competitor to the U.S., indicate also that overall attitudes to Japan were largely positive (Morris 2006: 88). Compared with notable episodes of "German scare," "Red scare," and of course the Japanese internment during WWII, this can be seen as vast improvement in the quality and rationality of public discourse in United States.

Era of the "Japan bashing" ended rather abruptly. Japan did not turn out to be a "wealth generating machine" (Lindsey and Aaron 1998) as hailed by the Revisionists. After the so called "bubble economy" of land and assets prices collapsed in early '90s, Japan entered the period, lasting until today, of economic malaise. The US fared much better and so Japan disappeared from the radar of public attentions, obscured by emerging China and the "War on Terror." Ironically, those taunting the Revisionists for their missed predictions today face similar problem, in light of massive troubles of American economy. Both models seem to have equally ran aground.

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